

This is a printer friendly version of an article from [www.heraldtribune.com](http://www.heraldtribune.com)  
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

Article published Oct 2, 2005

## Divining Ethel Waters

*One-woman show at FST celebrates a trailblazing career*

By CHARLIE HUISKING  
[charlie.huisking@heraldtribune.com](mailto:charlie.huisking@heraldtribune.com)

Finding one performer with the talent and charisma to play pioneering black singer and actress Ethel Waters is a difficult enough challenge. So Florida Studio Theatre officials feel fortunate they found two.

Jannie Jones and Chaundra Cameron will share the title role in "Ethel Waters: His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The one-woman show, written by Sarasota playwright Larry Parr, will have its world premiere this week at FST.

"This is an incredibly demanding role, physically and emotionally," said director Dennis Courtney. "It's not just the vocal demands. We follow Ethel through this amazing emotional journey."

"We felt it would be better to have two actresses alternate the role. That way, each of them can come in fully loaded. They get time to breathe and recover."

Born in 1896, Waters overcame poverty and racism to become a nightclub headliner, a recording artist, a Broadway star and an Oscar-nominated actress.

Cameron and Jones are good friends who are thrilled to have the opportunity to portray the trailblazing performer. They describe themselves as collaborators, even though they won't be onstage in the same performance.

"Dennis has had us view each other's rehearsal process," Cameron said. "That's made for a wonderful, cohesive experience. I'm able to pick up on some things Jannie is trying, and she can see what I'm doing."

Cameron's regional theater credits include "Sophisticated Ladies," "Menopause: The Musical" and "The Devil's Music," in which she starred as Bessie Smith.

Jones is familiar to local audiences for her performances in several FST productions, including "Blues in the Night" and "All Night Strut." She also played Alberta Hunter in another of Parr's one-woman shows, "My Castle's Rockin'." She's just completed two years with the Broadway production of "The Full Monty."

Jones said she's pleased that she and Cameron can put their individual stamps on the role.

"We don't have to be carbon copies of one another," she said. "I'm allowed to do Ethel Waters through Jannie Jones' body, through my own experiences. I can explore how I would react to what she went through."

Interested?

Ethel Waters: His Eye Is on the Sparrow

Opens at 8 p.m. Friday following previews at 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday at Florida Studio Theatre, 1241 N. Palm Ave., Sarasota. Matinee and evening performances through Dec. 2. Tickets are \$19 to \$34. Call 366-9000 or access [www.fst2000.org](http://www.fst2000.org).

"And being able to watch how my friend Chaundra is exploring the role is wonderful. I'll see the way she makes a certain transition, for example, and I'll think, 'That works for me too, girl.'"

Waters, the daughter of a teenage rape victim, grew up in the slums of Philadelphia. She began performing on the black vaudeville circuit in 1917, but first attracted wide attention in the Cotton Club in Harlem. There, she performed "Stormy Weather," a song Harold Arlen had written for her.

Waters became a Broadway star in Irving Berlin's "As Thousands Cheer," and later performed in "Cabin in the Sky" and "The Member of the Wedding," both on Broadway and in subsequent film versions.

In 1949, Waters earned an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress in "Pinky," playing a black woman who passes as white.

Parr said he's been intrigued by Waters ever since he read her autobiography, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," when he was a teenager. The only black child in his high school loaned him the book.

"The journey (Waters) took through her life fascinated me," he said. "How could someone start out in such low circumstances and reach the heights of her profession? How could she overcome racism to find true happiness and wholeness in her life?"

This is Parr's third one-woman show about black female entertainers, following "My Castle's Rockin'" and "Hi Hat Hattie," a play about actress Hattie McDaniel.

"I'm really a devastatingly gorgeous and alluring black woman trapped in a playwright's body," Parr joked.

The play contains 16 musical numbers associated with Waters, including the hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," "Stormy Weather," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Dinah," "Heat Wave" and "The Joint Is Jumpin'."

Between songs, Waters reminisces about her life and career. But director Courtney said Parr avoids the pitfalls of the one-person show genre.

"He's created a play about emotional memory," Courtney said. "It's not just a laundry list of, 'Then I did this and sang that.'"

Cameron and Jones feel honored to be able to introduce Waters to audience members who may not know her story.

"I admire her courage and determination," Jones said. "She wouldn't settle for the usual black roles, where you just said 'No ma'am' and 'Yes'm.' She paved the way for people like me to be on Broadway. I'm resting on her shoulders, and I'm grateful for that."